MASTERLY STORIES OF AMERICAN RANCH LIFE :-:

By HENRY WALLACE PHILLIPS
Author of the Famous RED SAUNDERS Tales

Susie, Sans Souci

(Copyright, 1915.)

IF YOU went over this blessed land of the free with a tooth-brush in one hand and a slab of sticky fly-paper in the other, you couldn't find no happier spot than Castleton. There's where the dove of peace put up a four-story brick hotel.

They never had hard storms in Castleton—always went 'round. The stones weren't rough there—quiet and well-behaved. The trees and the grass and the flowers grew with no noise and fuss whatsoever, and as for the people, there never was a word spoken hard enough to draw the temper of any man. It was a placer-mining Paradise.

It cuddled under a gosh-almighty cliff of white quartz—a cliff that shot five hundred foot in the air. A pool, clear as innocence itself, washed the cliff. Old spruces, that had their growth when Moses played hookey, shaded it.

Hank Peters' dam formed the pool. The other boys either sluiced at his place or flumed the water down a ways.

There was Hank, and Jim Smith, and Missouri Jim; Charley Hand and his wife; Bill Gaudy and his wife; the Stevenses, the Cropseys, the Ole boys and a lot I can't remember, and Tom Ivy, the Cousin Jack who did a retail postoffice business and sold food and patent medicines, the two staples of any honest camp. Of course there was luxuries, like tobacco and whiskey on the side. Tom didn't sell the whiskey—that was against the law, and never a soul was against the law in Castleton. Nope, Tom gave you the whiskey, and you bought a briar-wood pipe. Those were the only expensive things in Tom's store—those pipes. You paid him a dollar and a quarter for one, when you could buy the same thing elsewhere for half a dollar. But what was the use of being mean when a man is kind enough to make you a present of a pint of good whiskey? Always we bought a pipe, and paid the price ungrudgingly. That was a law, too, and, as I said, nobody broke laws in Castleton.

There was sleep in Castleton. I don't mean just forgetting what's going on around you for a certain length of time—I mean the kind of sleep when you almost know how good you're sleeping, and how much you're enjoying it, although you ain't more 'n begun before somebody's hollering in your ear and it's sunup once more. Then you stretch and smell the good old pines and truck and say, "That was some sleep. Lord! Where's breakfast?"

Yessir, for pure comfort give me Castleton, where life run like a river of soothing syrup through a meadow of dreams, sunup to sundown, sundown to sunup, three hundred and sixty-five days, plus, per annum.

But just as soon as he sees anything like that, old John H. Devilkins gets busy with his fine work. That's the one thing he won't stand for—peace and comfort; so that is the reason a cloud come by night, chilling our tranquillitee. And it was a cloud not much larger than a man's hand, at that—particularly if the man was holding 'em good just then.

Its name was Susie Waters. I don' doubt it had a silver lining, this little cloud, but as it happened to be a young lady cloud, no gentleman should mention such a thing, even a silver one. Lining or not, it wanted some oil to still the troubled Waters, because they'd been raised by a Gale.

Tincup Gale, Susie's father, was the lad that hit it at Tincup in the early days. The echo of the strike hadn't much more'n drifted down the canon before the old man opened up a free variety show, with free champagne squirting on the side. They said he had ten men working for him, and every shovelful of dirt they lifted was a dollar in the old man's pocket, and they added that every time he lifted his hand, whisho! away went the whole bizee! He considered the sight of a sober man an insult to his hospitality. 'Twas a merry spot for a while—Tincup.

Then the old man married and got religion. As for his religion, that's as it may be, but he sure got a decent wife—old snoozers like him always does. Susie was the result. They sent her back East to school when she was grown enough, and she come home, running most of the available live-stock, from two to six footed, that the neighborhood afforded. She had all kinds of fancy fool ideals the Eastern folk fill their noddles with, being too lazy to think, and she tucked forty-seven different kinds of her own make-up on that.

And then Bob Waters, one of the nicest, quietest, kindest boys the Lord ever passed over the border, had to go and get stuck on her. Nothing that friends, sense, nor misfortune could say had any weight with him.

He goes, story-book style, to old man Gale and asks his consent.

"No!" says the old man.

"But I can take care of her, all right, and I'll use her well!"

"No!" yells the old man.

"But what you got agin me, Gale?"

"I ain't got nothing agin you. If Susie took after her maw, I'd say: Go to it. But she takes after me, and nobuddy knows better what that means than I do. If you want her, snatch her—but don't you go a-luggin' me into it as her accomplice before the fack."

So they got married and come to Castleton. And the devil he laughed. For this is where he strung it all over us—had us smeared and gummed and razzle-dazzled like a daddy-long-legs in a barrel of tar.

Yes, here they come, Mr. and Mrs. Waters. The very first day old Grandpaw and Grandmaw Beaver, that had held down the dam since the memory of man, pulled up stakes and left. Sign number one. The big mountain-lion that had his hole in the cliff above us and yowled on moonlight nights skipped, and the rampike atop of Sweetney's Mountain come crashing down. Any man that had sense would have took warning and followed suit, but there's this difference between the brute things and men; when an animal gets a hunch, he follows it; when a man gets a hunch, he bucks, to show how smart he is. Well, well!

Here come little Susie, anyhow. At first she was so pretty and lively, it seemed like a good thing. Moreover, I didn't run afoul of strangers much, so I didn't cross her line of activities for some time.

Then one morning I happened into Tom's shack and I see things ain't as they ought to be.

Tom's pardner was an Injun lady, weighing a modest little two hundred or so. Always before, she's so proud of her white man that Adam and Eve, before they loaded up on applejack, weren't to be compared to this pair.

But now war was in the air, blood on the moon, and signs of approaching disorder.

I started to back away, having acted once for all as umpire in a family jar—but Tom held me up.

"Just you a-listen to me a bit, Reddy, dear," says he. "Us is about to have a row—an' w'y? says you. Because of that son-of-a-beggar, Bob Waters' wife! Wot's her done? says you. I tell 'ee now. Her comes and fills my old 'ooman's ears with such a talk you ne'r see—'tis orful, mon, orful! All about she don't belong to do a tap o' work at all. That I be a tyrant on her and do aboose her, and all and all till it come to this."

And poor old Tom wiped his eyes with the back of his hand, being broke in his feelings.

"Well, what's next?" says I.

"I do be goin' to give her a little rap wi' this," says Tom, holding up a pineknot club. "Just a little diff," 'usbandloike—nuthin' to 'urt, but to remind her of her juty."

"Well, let me out!" says I. "It's against the rules to beat a lady!"

"I know, I know!" says poor Tom. "And black the shame to her that caused it! 'Ere we goes along, come this many a year, and never a word, till this hussycat starts up her yammerin'! And now 'ill the ol' 'ooman wash a dish or pan? Her will not! Jeemima!" he says. "Go wash up, do 'ee dear, like a good witch!"

"Ur-g-gh!" says Mrs. Ivy. "Go wash self! You dam' lazy. You no good. You wash. I sleep!"

"'Ear her, Reddy dear," he says, "'ow she talks to me! 'Tis past and away endurin'. Do 'ee watch now, and see she can't throw to me I done her a bit of rale harm, 'cos, come it to wusslin', her could flap me like an ol' shirt in a harricane, her's that bodily strong! 'Ain't a better ol' gal in the country! 'Llweffngwlch y grwbbwr!'" says he in Welsh. "I got to do it to 'ee, dearie!"

So he jumped up and lammed her one—toonk!—on the coco, and down she goes. The house shook.

Tom stands over her, wiping his eyes with one hand and waving the club with the other.

"Will'ee go now, sweetling?" he says. "Aw do, lovey!"

"Shinto!" says Mrs. Ivy. "I go!"

"Listen to her now?" says Tom. "Could 'ee ask a better trollop? Buss me one afore ye leave me, wrench!" So they hugged and kissed each other.

"A-weel, a-weel, 'tis over, praise be!" says Tom. "What 'ill have, Reddy lad?" So I bought my stuff, taking my time to it, whiles from the kitchen Mrs. Ivy sung, "Mah, lache coa nah," cheerful and happy, and stuck a large and admiring face around the edge of the door, now and again, to get a peek at that prince of men, her lord and master, who sent her to grass with one wallop, just as easy! "Some man, that!" says Mrs. Ivy to herself.

After, I met little Susie on her travels once or twice and see for myself where the springs of trouble lay. What does she do but open on the error of man's ways. She brought up to me several little incidents concerning ladies that was their business and the men's: no self-respecting young female person would have mentioned 'em, anyhow. But Susie, she don't give any one of as many assorted good gosh-darns as you could bring before you. Not a whoop cares Susie.

"That's just the way with you men!" she says, when I explained that she ought to let the other ladies kick, if there was any kick coming. "Setting up a double standard! One life for women, another life for men!"

"Get out!" says I. "What you talking about? How'sa man going to get into a woman fuss without a woman to help him? There ain't any double standard." She insisted there was, and I joshed her to get rid of her, because, of course, nobody thinks it is a square deal to slam a woman for the thing that's only looked upon as a fair sporting proposition in a man. It kind of spoils your argument, knowing that.

"I'll fix all that on this creek!" says Susie, sitting up straight and shaking her finger at me—a pretty little piece of deviltry, at that. "I'll show you male brutes a thing or two! We women can do something when we get started!"

"Careful, careful, little Susie!" says I. "Don't burn its nice fingers! Where ignorance is bliss 'tis folly to get blistered. You may show us what you'll do when you start, but look out we don't show you what you'll do when you're stopped!"

But she just snaps her head and walks off, full of trouble.

Next day or so Charley Hand takes me out for a confidential talk. He converses bitterly between his grinding teeth.

"Yah!" says he. "Could you ask for a quieter home, a decenter layout, than this was before that little carrot-headed, swiveled-tongued, hen-witted, pepper-tempered ten pounds of impudence and riot hit this placer camp?"

"No," says I.

"Sure not!" says he. "And now! If I don't get it slammed into me from morn to eve what a bunch of misapplied mistakes my whole darn life is! that's me, Joe Bush! If Bob don't rope and tie down that heifer of hisn, why I'll lam him till my wind gives out. He's responsible, he is."

"But what's it all, Bill?"

He kinder stammered and got red in the face. "Well," he says, "it's like this: wife and me, we never got certificate-married. When I was twenty-odd, I took cross-lots with an outfit Sally and her father was in. Cheyennes jumped us. Plugged Sal's father. He says, 'Take the gal and skip!' After he died, I done accordin'. Sal and me we liked each other from the



"I'll show you male brutes a thing or two!"

I'm a second-rate dog-robber! I ain't a-going to say one word against the wife. 'Tain't her fault; she just talks like a poll-parrot. But what the devil ails Susie, anyhow? She's got the nicest man that ever lived, and plenty to eat, drink, sleep, and wear. Why, that darn little monkey would start something in heaven! If a he-angel had wings five inches longer than hern, she'd plot with the devil to let the old boy in the back way of a dark night. You don't know what it is to stand a woman's gabble about things neither you nor she knows anything about. And a good woman's worse than a bad woman.. I don't know how I'm going to stand that wife of mine much longer."

I gave him all the paregoric pursyflage I had on tap and sent him on his way.

And then I sighed and thought of the ruin of our happy home. Hadn't much more 'n got decently melancholy, when here comes Bill Gaudy, boilin'. Bill, he's another kind of feller from Hand, altogether. He used to be shootsome and punchiferous before he quieted down, and strong streaks of the old days lay in him yet. Hand took argument; Gaudy, action. Hand ground his teeth; Bill snapped 'em.

"See here, Red Saunders!" says he. "I'm a'goin' to raise somethin' so close to hell-fire and brimstone around this camp that 'twould take an old line Methody parson to learn the difference. Bob Waters may be a good feller, all right, when he's alone; but now he ain't no more'n Mister Susie, and I'm a-goin' to work on them principles."

"Well," says I, giving up all hopes of quiet grief, "what's loose this time? J've just passed Charley along."

"He makes me sick," says Bill. "Talk, talk, talk! I'm for motion; jump. If two people don't get moderately well acquainted and find whether they're really suited to each other, spendin' two months dodgin', shootin', and otherwise carryin' on with Injuns, I dun' no' what anybuddy could suggest. Question is, how's Sal an' me to dig up a preacher when we're on the keen livin' jump, mornin', noon, an' night, with the Cheyennes cayoodlin' on our trail? Don't you think we'd been darn glad to see a preacher, or any other old white thing you'd be minded to mention? On your life, pardy, on your life we would! But there ain't none to be had. We was always goin' to get married proper some day, but sumpin' blew crossways to head us off. Sometimes Sal she ain't got any good dress; sometimes I ain't got any good pants; or we go a-hustlin' after pay summers, or some darn thing, anyhow. Preacher or no preacher, where you goin' to find better kids than ours? Upstandin' manly little fellers, that never give their paw nor maw a word o' slack nor make no trouble at all. Then what? Why, here comes that little ginger-topped filly of Waters' without more 'n one hoof to the ground ever, and runs into my herd niggerin' and squealin' and kickin' till the old lady is war-hoppin' and singin' ghost songs all the time. My old pardner!" yells Bill. "The best that God ever made, accusin' me of workin' roots on her! The woman that shot side by side with me, starved with me, thirsted, and faced death and torture, accusin' me of playin' low down on her! Just because that copper-headed, wigglin' snake of a Waters woman has told her it ain't respectable to be married onless a parson caps for the game! God A'mighty married me, an' I don't want nothin' from no parson. Had she 'a' come easy at me, I'd sasshayed to town at once. But rough-housin' like this? Nonny-no, little Sal! You gotter play easy with the old man. 'S'mever, wait till I get through with Waters—he'll be a runnin' stream, all right."

So he left, chawing the air in his frenzy. A little chipmunk hopped in front of me, jerked his tail, shook his head, and moseys off, saying as plain as day, "I'm feelin for you, old man, but you're sure slewed sideways now!"

And then to my mind comes a picture of Mr. J. H. Devilkins, sitting at his ease, a cup of boiling spiced pitch by his side, smoking a good cigar, and laughing till his tail cracked. Quite a chunk broke off my patience at the sight.

"Listen!" says I to him. "Many's the turn-up you and me have had together. Many's the time I've let you have the best of it out of pure politeness, though you ain't gentleman enough to appreciate it. And now you don't get away with this. I'll see you in hell first."

Yes. But what you going to do with a lady? Almost as bad as figgering what you'll do without one. I sat there and planned and plotted. The sun shone green through the spruces. The creek hollered as it played tag with the rocks. The air come to my nose, sweet with a million smells of greenery and flowers. A deer comes to the creek, sees me, blows and snorts and makes a fuss, but I'm so gummed in my trouble that nary a move for me, so he nuzzles the water and drinks his fill.

"Everything in this world can get along with everything else if it has to," says I, "And," I says, as I got to my hind legs, "it has to."

I ambled along to the Waters' shack, hoping to catch Bob alone, but Susie was there, sitting on the doorstep, combing her hair. 'Twas beautiful hair, bright as gold, fine as silk, and she did look so innocent, and creamy, and altogether tasty, so natural a thing for an arm to creep around, and with such a sassy little mouth for kisses, I couldn't blame Bob Waters a particle. She had a trick of squinching up her eyes and nibbling her under lip that made you want to pick her right up and hug her.

"Drat your pretty picture!" I says. "No wonder the devil wants you, too! There ain't a critter with a bit of 'he' in him that wouldn't." That's the point; there was so much she-ness to Susie. The other women were the best kind of pards, but 'tweren't that fascinating other-side-of-the-way to 'em.

I sat out till Waters finished his noontime grub and pulled for his claim. I stalked him out of sight of the shack and hailed him.

He looked weary and dispirited.

"Well, Red!" says he. "What kick you got coming?"

This opened things.

"Bob," I says, "you got to put your house in order."

He shucked his coat and hung it on a bush. "I've reached the point," says he, "where I'd rather fight than talk."

"Now, Bob," says I, "if you and me come to blows, I ain't denying that you'll do something, but ain't it drawing it long to call it fighting? Where you been boarding lately, to raise the nerve of talking about fighting me?"

"Well," says he, "let that go as a slip of the tongue. What I mean is, I'd rather take a beating than any more gab. And I dun'no," says he, his eyes beginning to glitter, "but what, if you bring my wife's name into the conversation, I'll come so near making a fight of it you'll be a busy little boy sorting out the difference. I ain't going to stand no more talk about my wife, nor hear a word against her!"

I was smoking a cigareet at the time, and, properly handled, a cigareet is one of the best helps to untruthful conversation. You can always have a lungful of smoke, or be just taking a puff when you need a minute to think, and if you are putting out something too raw, you can blow a cloud before your face to hide your eyes. So I took a long suck and whoofed it out and then said:

"What's eating you, Bob? Say anything against your wife? Why, man, I was just thinking I ain't ever seen anything prettier in my life than her setting on the doorstep! Why, she's the quickest, brightest, snappiest little lady in the whole of Dakota! No, no, Bob! Don't get your ideas tangled! Me say anything against your wife? You're dreaming!"

"Oh!" says he, and puts on his coat.

"No, no!" I said, putting the hand of friendly advice on his shoulder. "What I'm talking about is this: once I owned a little sorrel mare. The slickest, fastest critter on prairie sod. I bought her cheap, because the folks that raised her wasn't fit to own her. They didn't understand her, and so she wasn't any use to anybody. You could trace her any time by bits of spokes and buggy-wheels, rags and tags of harness, and odds and ends of skin wore off the would-be drivers as she dragged 'em through the mud. 'Twas a shame, the way the pretty thing was mishandled. I hadn't owned her a month, Bob, before she'd come to my whistle like a dog. I never had to touch whip nor rein to her. She had intelligence, as well as fire, and once she understood who was really running things, 'twould make you cry to see how hard she tried to please. If I told her to stand, there she'd stand, her legs a-tremble, snorting a bit and tossing her head, but there she'd stand, Bob, though hell blew its lid off. Most of the time she had more sense than me, at that. And when I was loaded, she took care of the game—brought me home safe and sound, no matter the road I traveled. All in the world she asked of me was to be her lord and master—that's what she wanted from the time she was foaled; something to look up to as any high-spirited person does—and that's a thing any gentleman ought to be willing to do for a lady."

"What's that?" says Bob. "I catch your parable, all right, but say it again."

"I say this: When it's plain that a woman is just craving and hungering for a man to be the boss, he ain't half a man 'less he lays all else to the side and makes her dream come true. He owes it to her."

"Um-m," says Bob. "If you had to listen to the string of talk I get, you'd gas a lot about a lady wanting a lord and master! Jeehosaphat! All I hear is what a bully I am; how I don't want nothing but my own way; how what I'd like is to make a perfect slave of a woman; the one thing I enjoy is to jump in the air and land on 'em with both feet."

"Why, Bob," says I, "how simple you are!" and I drags in a double lungful of smoke, while Bob gazes at me surprised.

"Meaning how?" says Bob.

"Like this," says I. "What's mosquitoes for, Bob?"

"I'll be damned if I know," says he; "nor you, neither."

"Oh yes, I do!" I says. "That's easy. Mosquitoes live in swamps. Man's so lazy he'd never clean up a swamp in a million years if he wa'n't prodded to it. 'Long comes Mister Mosquito and gives him a jab. 'Go and dig, you lazy brute!' says he—'Jabbitty, jibbity, jab! Dig, you son-of-a-mule, dig!' So the man, being tormented to it, digs."

"Hum!" says Waters. "I wind your smoke!"

"Surest thing you know!" says I. "Susie can't say, 'Come, boss me around,' can she? So she's got to torment you into it."

Bob scratched his head. "You got a mighty persuasive way of putting it," says he. "I kinder wonder if you ain't right."

"Sure!" says I. "The little girl and the mosquito are doing the same thing—prodding you into acting the man."

He grinned. "That story could have been told me so's I'd want to fight. You're the darnest old red-headed son-of-a-gun to have your own way I ever know. I'll think about this a bit," says he. "I sure will. But I always reckoned before that mosquitoes and other varmints and these here wimmen's tricks was the devil's work. You twist them 'tother side to—how comes that?"

"Well, God Almighty and the devil are running the whole show between 'em, 'ain't they?"

"Sure!"

"Then everything they both do is all right or the works would blow up. How could you have the two bosses queering each other and get any kind o' results?" Studying this took his mind off his troubles.

Now was my time. "Discipline, my boy!" I said. "Get the best of her! Put it all over her, nice and kind, and firm and final."

He stared at me. Says he: "I thought you were really going to say something, instead of singing yourself lullabys. Why don't you teach people to fly? It's very simple. All you got to do is to draw your hind legs up and keep 'em there!"

I grabbed hold of him. "Listen!" says I. "You've heard about truth lying at the bottom of a well, ain't you?"

"Yes," says he, "I have. What of it?"

"What else do you find in the bottom of a well?"

"Water," says he.

I gave him a gentle punch in the ribs. "You can make it plural," I said. "Waters—Susie Waters, at that. A prospect hole's a good deal like a well, ain't it? And nobody could come to any great harm at the bottom of a prospect hole, could they? Yet they might be good and glad to get out of it if the party that put 'em there was determined, hey? Now, don't you ever say I interfered in any way, shape, manner, custom, nor habit with your family affairs, but put my little remarks between your wisdom teeth and chew on 'em."

You could see him think. He was an honest sort of Jimmy, and, like most good-natured people, you'd have to pry him loose with a crowbar once he got sot. "I get you!" says he, slow. "I savvy the burro, and I'll go you once if it bursts me. I don't know whether I'm much obliged or not at this stage of the game, but I'll say thanky, on an off chance."

He grabbed up his tools and passed on.

Well, the next day I happened accidental, more or less, by the Waters' shack. There was Bob in the act of lowering something down the prospect hole. I come up on my tippy-toes. He hollers down the hole.

"There's your breakfast, dear," says he. "I ain't much on making coffee, and flapjacks is my limit in the pastry line—hope you like it; it's good and hot."

And there come a yell from the bottom of that hole, and a sound of rendering coffee-pots and smashing flapjacks.

"You take your old stuff back," yells Susie. "Oh, wait till I get out of here!"

"Sure—I'm waiting," says Bob. "I'm about all there is in the waiting line. Soon's you tell me you're going to be a good little girl, up you come. But not before. No."

Then there was much talk from below.

"No," answers Bob: "there ain't a thing to hurt you. If it rains, you can crawl back in the tunnel. I'll bring you water and grub regular. If you don't want to eat, that's your funeral. I'm slow on the cook, and that's a fact. I miss you terrible. Gee! it's lonesome, smoking all by myself nights."

I learned something, waiting around the top of that prospect hole for the next two days. I couldn't have believed there was so many possible arguments, and so many different ways of swearless cussings. She sure was game! I almot begun to believe Bob would have to weaken, but when I spoke of it he said he'd fight it out on that line if it took ten years. The other women come and tried to argue and browbeat him. He never lost a particle of his temper. 'Twould remind you of little birds assaulting a grizzly bear. They wore themselves out. But they kind of got mad, too, when they made nice pies for Susie and she smashed 'em, out of temper.

Well, the morning of the third day she ate her breakfast. Bob apologized for it, and she said it tasted first rate, but that he didn't love her any more. He said he did. There was lots to talk about that.

Finally Bob dropped easy ways and told her blunt she had to stop her foolishness and say she was going to be a good little girl. And then all the quibbling and evading and dodging and squirming and hedging I ever heard was beaten out of sight. She said she didn't know what he meant; she had been good—besides, if she said so, how could she keep her promise? And how did she know what he meant by being good? And what was being good, anyhow? And if you were good how could you tell it? And so forth and more forth.

"Listen!" said Bob. "All you got to do is say you're going to be a good little girl! I'll chance your knowing the details—just say them words, and up you come. Don't say 'em, and down you stay."

More talk from the bottom.

"Say, 'I'll be a good little girl,'" says Bob. She talks at him. "Say you'll be a good little girl!"

Talk.

Same old thing, same old thing, same old thing, till I got dizzy.

Finally, seeing nothing was going forward: "All right," says he. "I reckon I'll sasshay along."

"Oo-o-o-oh! Bob!"

"Well?" says Bob, going back.

"You don't give me any time to think," says she. "I was just trying to figure——"

"Good-by!" says Bob.

"Bob!"

No answer.

"Bob!"

No answer.

"Bob! I'll be a good little girl!"

"Ah!" says Bob. "Now you're shouting!"

There's where I hot-footed it out of that. That afternoon, old Grandpaw and Gammaw Beaver returned to the creek. He hit his old shovel-tail on the water and made out to be scared to death, but Grammaw took the cracker out of my hand as usual. Later I heard three yells of greeting from the cliff-side. Our mountain-lion friend was home. Of course the rampike went down for ever: you can't get everything back in the same spot again. But peace had settled once more on Castleton.